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SUBJECT: 'ABDUCTED' CHILDREN CASE STIRS TRAFFICKING DEBATE

11. SUMMARY: The discovery of 39 children being trucked more than 2000 kilometers in squalid conditions reignited debate regarding trafficking in persons in Mozambique. Although the parents asserted that the children were being sent to Islamic schools for religious training, none of the heads of the schools admitted knowing anything about the children. The debate raised the awareness of the authorities and the public about a problem that is rarely discussed openly. END SUMMARY.

12. Mozambican Police recently intercepted a truck carrying 39 children, ages 6 to 15, from the Northern provinces of Mozambique to Maputo, more than 2,000 kilometers away. The children were traveling in the back of a truck, with little food or water, accompanied only by the driver and one other adult. Ultimately the police established that the children were traveling to Maputo to enroll in Islamic schools to receive religious education; the Attorney General's Office, after investigation, concluded that the children were traveling with the consent of their parents.

13. No head of any Islamic school in Maputo admitted knowing anything about the children. One of the most important Muslim leaders in the country, Sheik Amminudin Muhammad, said that it was common practice for students from the Northern provinces to attend his school but enrollment, completed before a child was sent to Maputo, required several steps, including parental approval. Many of the procedures were not followed in this case, leading observers to suggest that the parents had been duped by con-men and the children were being sent to an unspecified destination for unknown and possibly dubious purposes.

14. Mozambican police and various children's NGOs labeled the case trafficking in persons and called on the government to tighten controls and show political will in combating such cases, which, they alleged, occur frequently. Research conducted by Mozambican university Professor Carlos Serra Junior concluded that Mozambican children of poor parents were vulnerable to trafficking. He cited reports of poor, illiterate rural parents giving their children to strangers for transport to urban areas, after receiving promises of schooling and employment for the children. Instead these children end up as domestic workers in slave-like conditions.

15. COMMENT: Although there is considerable debate as to whether the case is a clear-cut example of trafficking in persons, the case raised the profile of this otherwise rarely discussed issue among the authorities and the public. In late 2007 the Government of Mozambique submitted a USAID-funded draft law outlawing trafficking in persons to the National Assembly. Whether the draft will be scheduled for discussion and approval when parliamentary sessions resume in March remains to be seen. END COMMENT.

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